Really, it is easy to simply associate Richard Garfield with Magic: The Gathering. I would bet that that is something that many gamers do: "Oh, Garfield, he did Magic." And that is a disservice. Mr. Garfield has the ability to take novel game mechanics and find great themes to mesh with those ideas and has proven that with other games such as RoboRally and Filthy Rich. I had the great fortune of having an extended conversation with Mr. Garfield at the JRG booth at Origins in 1999. In just that one conversation, I realized just how much thought and effort Garfield puts into his games, his writings, and his ideas.

METAGAMES

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When I was in high school I played a lot of games that required diplomacy. For a while I felt that each game should stand alone, and you shouldn't count a player's behavior in one game for or against that player in the next. This is, of course, hopelessly idealistic, and couldn't in practice be done even if it was desirable. I was quickly forced to abandon that point of view or suffer eternal losses in these games due to a lack of credibility.

This means that those games were, to some extent, inherently unfair to someone joining a group of regular players. By the same token, this was part of the appeal to the regular players. The way reputations and play styles became known and evolved put the games into a larger and more important context. This was where I learned as a player the importance of the metagame.

Later, in my college career, I started game ladders and leagues from time to time. I was always amazed at how much this added structure seemed to increase the appeal of the game. Would we have played as much spades as we did hearts if I had made that the league? Could gin have taken the place of chess? It is clear that the underlying game was important in each case; however, it is also clear that the structure established around the game and the context in which it was played was also important. The mere fact that a game was being played regularly added to its appeal. As someone who organized games, this was where I learned the importance of the metagame.

Later, while attending graduate school, I conceived of a game in which each player was only given some of the components. Through trading with other players, in a context completely separate from the game itself, players had to acquire the components they wanted to use during the game. This concept was somewhat modeled on modern sports teams, which seek out and trade for the best players they can in order to get a winning team. This concept was what lead to Magic™, my first published game. I believe the concept was the main contributor to its success. This was where I learned the importance of the metagame as a game designer.

WHAT IS THE METAGAME ANYWAY?

My definition of metagame is broad. It is how a game interfaces outside of itself. A particular game, played with the exact same rules, will mean different things to different people, and those differences are the metagame. The rules of poker may not change between a casino game, a neighborhood nickel-dime-quarter game, and a game played for matchsticks, but the player experience in these games will certainly change. The experience of roleplaying with a group of story-oriented players and playing with some goal-oriented power gamers is entirely different, even though the underlying rules being played with may be the same.

There is of course no game without a metagame - by this definition. A game without a metagame is like an idealized object in physics. It may be a useful construct but it doesn't really exist.

My motivation for thinking about the metagame is mostly academic, driven from my interest in understanding games; how they work, and what their appeal is. In general, I think metagames are poorly understood and not often thought about, and that could be for a good reason. It is hard to leverage the metagame to make a better game, since the metagame is only indirectly involved with game design. Indeed, the majority of a game's metagame is probably unalterable by game designer or publisher. Nevertheless, the metagame is incredibly powerful, and whatever one can do to make your players metagame experience good is going to be worth a lot of effort. I believe that a compelling metagame is what separates a hobby, like Magic™, Dungeons and Dragons™, or Bridge, from a more typical game.

It should be noted that my professional background is primarily in the pen-and-paper hobby industry. I have studied and designed games in a very broad range but tend to approach games from what I call an orthogame perspective. An orthogame is a 2 or more player game where there are victory conditions. Typically I think about single player games and role-playing games separately. Unless I say otherwise I am talking about orthogames.

WHAT TYPES OF METAGAMES ARE THERE?

A metagame is the interface of the game outside itself. Therefore, the players I choose to bring to a sporting event is metagame. How a game affects my standing in a league is metagame. Talking about a game and applying what I learned from it to real life is metagame. Knowing my opponent handles pressure poorly is part of the metagame. It is not surprising that a definition so broad leads to so many disparate examples.

I like to divide metagame into four categories. There is what a player brings to the game, whether that is physical, like a deck or a sports team or mental, like strategic preparation or training. There is what a player takes away from a game, such as prize money, standings in a tournament, gloating rights, or reputation. There is what happens between games, like training or reflection upon previous games. Finally, there is what happens during a game other than the game itself, like trash talk or time-outs.

BRINGING THINGS TO A GAME

Players always bring a set of resources to a game, sometimes physical and sometimes mental. Usually a player has some level of choice in what to bring, though there can be resources that they have little or no control over. The things that are being brought can have a huge influence over the game, or a small influence.

Some of the physical things that may be brought to a game are decks to a Magic game, rackets to a tennis match, and your reflexes to a game of Quake™. You have a lot of control over your deck and your racket but not so much over your reflexes. You do have some control though, since you can train up your reflexes and eat correctly and avoid alcohol and so forth. The deck you bring to Magic and the reflexes you bring to Quake have a lot to do with your ability to win, but the racket you bring for a tennis match only has a little.

Some mental things you may bring to a game are a study of certain openings in chess, knowledge of your opponents in backgammon, and ability to memorize cards in Hearts. You have a lot of control over the openings you study, and often have control over how well you know your opponent, but your

ability to memorize cards may be inherently limited (though there is almost always room for improvement within one's capabilities.) The openings you have studied in chess may have a large significance to your winning a game, as your ability to memorize cards may help your ability to win hearts. It is unlikely that your knowledge of your opponent will help you significantly in backgammon, and certainly it will be less important than your knowledge of your opponents in Poker or Diplomacy.

The decision of what resources exactly to bring to a game is often one that a lot of players like. They like to deliberate on it and weigh the options and ultimately pit their choices against their opponents.

TAKING THINGS FROM A GAME

Players always take something away from the game - foremost on this list are the stakes of play. Of course I don't just mean money, though that is sometimes an issue, but more generally status, the stigma of being the loser or the pride of being the winner.

There is a social contract in playing a game - that you care about winning (or more generally - doing well). If you don't then the game is pointless and feels like a waste of time. This is particularly easy to see when you are playing with strangers, or anonymously over the net. It is a real letdown when playing and you realize the other player doesn't care, and show this by not paying attention or playing to a reasonable standard, or even by quitting when the conclusion is not forgone. Anyone who has had a player lose intentionally knows exactly what I am talking about. This is not exactly correlated, as you might think, with how casual a game is. Even very casual games breakdown when it becomes clear a player or players don't care about doing well, or are throwing games.

One important and common stake that is played for is standing in a tournament or set of games. This can range from simply playing best two out of three games, all the way to vast tournaments or leagues that take place over a period of days or months. One interesting thing about this is that players are taking one game seriously because of how it affects another game, the match or league or ladder or tournament.

One might ask why making the rewards of one game in terms of another works. After all, if I don't take games seriously it shouldn't matter if I am doing well in a game or a league. It works for two reasons, first the longer the game the larger the investment, and therefore the people are likely to take it more seriously. A game such as poker which has a short playing time is hard to take seriously unless you string together the results, in this case, generally the money you win or lose. The other reason this works is that the players who take the game seriously in a well constructed league or tournament will tend to end up playing each other, and that adds to the value.

Things that a player takes away from the game that would not be regarded as stakes may include an experience and/or a story. Experience may validate or contradict your beliefs about the game or your opponents going into the game. The story is the tale of the game, the way you seized victory from the jaws of defeat, or defeat from the jaws of victory. The good or bad moves you made, the strange things that may have happened. In short, any noteworthy thing contributes to the tale you take away from the game.

BETWEEN GAMES

Between the games players do all sorts of things, and these things can add a lot of value to the play experience. One of the most common things is reflection on strategy, planning for the next game. This is when a poker player says to himself "I am going to play more aggressively next time". This is when a chess player toys with the idea of making a different opening move or responding to a particular opening in a different way.

In some ways this is simply planning what you are bringing to the next game, whether that is assembling a new deck for Magic, buying a new racket for tennis, or planning your strategy in chess. This aspect of the game is valuable to the person who plays games as a hobby, and for some games and players even more enjoyable than the game itself.

Not all that happens between games is a solitary activity. Talking about what happened in your previous games, spreading the stories and building the reputations of the players involved is a large part of the play experience for some people. After finishing a hand of hearts, I will find myself talking to the other players about the point I realized I was doomed, or where exactly I faltered in my play, or what subtle hint gave me the insight to make a particular move.

Some of the activity between games is preparation, but not of the strategic kind. Players take special pride in how their miniatures are painted in a miniatures game, and will put a lot of time in preparing for the game in things which are superfluous to whether they win or lose. If it is a historical miniatures game, they will read about different historical account of the battle they are about to play, not principally to win the game but because the conflict will have more meaning with a historical context prepared. In role playing, the game master will spend a great deal of time preparing the next adventure the players will play through, and the players may spend time developing their character or deciding what the character is doing in the 'down time'.

DURING GAMES

There can be a number of ways that real life bleeds into a game. The most common, totally non-competitive part of life that bleeds into the game is the pleasure of the company you are sharing. There are some people who make any game fun to play - that is a quality of the metagame those people are generating, not the game itself. Similarly, good or poor lighting, smoky or noisy atmosphere can all affect the pleasure you take in a game while playing the game.

Competitive players may participate in trash talking or head games to throw their opponents off. Also, they may exploit peoples' reputation to their advantage during a game. And they may exploit, intentionally or not, relationships external to the game. You have to be careful playing poker with a couple, for example.

Sometimes a game or contest has a mechanism which is there to allow players to practice their in-game metagame. This is something of the form of a time out in sports. Timeouts allow players to replenish their stamina and clear their heads, as well as take a fresh look at the strategy they are using. This isn't just the case in sports, though this mechanism is most meaningful in a real time game. Time outs are occasionally quite important in a game like Starcraft.

Finally there are some games which are designed to bleed into real life. A simple example of this is a stock picking game, where the games stock prices are based on real stocks. Another example is Killer; a game in which each player has another player secretly chosen for them to hunt. They have to shoot their target with a squirt gun - typically with some restriction on the number of witnesses. Following the shooting the new target is whomever the victim was hunting. Killer typically lasts weeks or months, and your lifestyle will affect your chances of being knocked out of the game. If you find yourself alone a lot in the course of the day, and the rules demand no witnesses, you are not going to last long. The thrill of the game stems largely from how it bleeds into your life, and how you choose to change your life to accommodate the game.

GETTING THE MOST OUT OF YOUR METAGAME

The more repetition there is to your play and the more consistent your play group, the easier it is for a rich metagame to develop. If you play a regular game of just about anything, with a more or less consistent group of players, your metagame is going to take care of itself. It doesn't hurt to add some record keeping or ritual to the mix to tie the games together, but it won't be necessary. For example, in a regular poker game I played for a few years, we gave the big winner an ugly ceramic pig. This pig would be brought each game, and displayed with pride by the previous champ. This naturally let players know when someone was on a large winning streak, because the pig would "live with them" for a few months.

For short games I would recommend setting up small tournaments that take place over an evening or a few evenings. Short games tend to be more satisfying

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and meaningful in the context of a tournament or league. League rules and tournament rules can easily be improvised once you put together a few.

If you get together with a play group regularly but change the games a lot it sometimes works well just to keep track of the results, and perhaps giving some "metagame" scores. For example, whenever we play hearts we pretend we were playing for a penny a point and write down how much up or down each player is. Being zero-sum works well in that I don't have to be a part of every game to be a part of this league. It can be abused in that playing with the weakest players will boost your score, but if everyone is more or less the same level, or in fairly informal cases it works well. And every once in a while you can purge the old results, declare a winner or set of winners (or a loser), and start fresh.

If your set of players is consistent, you can even just add your results from successive games without the zero-sum part. For example - race games can be played where the winner gets 5 points, the second place 3, third 2, and fourth 1. If you then just start adding the points up you can play 12 games, first to 10 points, or just keep track till people aren't interested anymore. Similarly, you can play hearts not to 100, but to 1000.

Finally, if you are like me, you have a bunch of games that you pull out every once in a while, quite irregularly and with widely varying groups of players. Even here you can work a little metagame magic by keeping track of the results of the game. If you pick up a copy of Filthy Rich, or Rail Baron, or any other random game in my game room you will see a string of results written down in the box. From this you can see the biggest wins of all time and the longest winning streaks. You can find out if going first is a big advantage, or getting a particular card dealt to you is a big advantage simply by keeping track of that data. Often you will see more and more details being given on the box scores as I question more and more of the game balances. Even at the simplest you have a record of how much the game has been played in the past and who played the game. More than once I have opened a game to be surprised by a string of scores which attested to far more play than I remembered the game ever getting.

IN CONCLUSION

Being aware of and taking control of the metagames associated with the games you play will not only make you a better player but will also make your games more enjoyable. In fact, almost every time I hear games being critiqued or lauded I hear people talking about the metagame, not the game itself. One's game experience with almost any game will be positive with a group of regular, good players. By good I mean "fun to play with", or good at the metagame, I don't mean "wins a lot". On the flip side, it is hard to have a good game experience no matter how good the game is if the metagame is bad.